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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001468

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: DAS DUGAN VISITS UBCV BUDDHIST LEADER IN HCMC

REF: 2003 HCMC 1010 and Previous

1. (SBU) Summary: Thich Quang Do, Secretary General of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) told DRL DAS Elizabeth Dugan that he strongly opposes the GVN communist government. In his first meeting with USG officials since he was placed under de facto "pagoda arrest" in October 2003, Thich Quang Do welcomed international pressure on Vietnam, lauded the USG decision to designate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), but opposed sanctions. He said there were no religious differences between the UBCV and the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha; his struggle was against authoritarian, one-party rule. Thich Quang Do reported that he would attempt to visit ailing UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Central Vietnam the following day. Despite our request to HCMC authorities, Thich Quang Do's visit was blocked on November 22 and reportedly was summoned to meet GVN officials as early as November 24. End Summary.

Foe of the Party

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2. (SBU) A strong and energetic UBCV Secretary General Thich Quang Do struck a defiant posture as an implacable foe of the Communist Party and the GVN in a meeting with visiting DRL DAS Dugan and the Consul General on November 21. Meeting with USG officials for the first time since October 2003 when he was placed under unofficial "pagoda arrest," (reftel) Thich Quang Do said that he will carry on his struggle to have the Vietnamese people live in dignity under a government that respects human rights. (Note: We had informed the authorities that we planned to visit the monk at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery Pagoda and met with no interference. There was noticeable police presence around the Pagoda. Thich Quang Do said that he had been encouraged by the police not to meet with us. He fully expected to suffer some consequences as a result of our visit, but made clear that he was neither afraid nor concerned. End Note)

3. (SBU) The 77-year old monk said that the GVN was more heartless than pre-1975 Saigon regimes, telling DAS Dugan that it took the self-immolation of six UBCV monks to bring down the regime of South Vietnamese President Diem in 1963. In contrast, at least 12 Buddhist monks have immolated themselves after 1975 (NFI), but the Communists haven't flinched. Thich Quang Do acknowledged that Vietnam had made economic progress since 1975. He argued, however, that this did not translate into greater human rights or personal freedom. Rather, Vietnam's leadership was using the country's prosperity to strengthen its hold on society. He criticized the lack of a free press in Vietnam, the export of labor and the rise of marriages of Vietnamese women to foreigners, saying that these policies led to both groups' exploitation.

4. (SBU) Thich Quang Do said that there were no religious or doctrinal differences between the banned UBCV and the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). Prior to 1975, 75 percent of all Buddhists in South Vietnam belonged to the UBCV. Many of these now are leaders in the VBS; Quang Do considers them all "brothers." He said that the creation of the VBS reflected GVN efforts to neutralize Buddhist strength. Communist Party leaders recognize that a unified, independent Buddhist organization would grow "beyond their control" and would be dangerous to the regime. The GVN would never allow this to happen, the UBCV leader told us.

Yes CPC; No Sanctions

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5. (SBU) Thich Quang Do welcomed USG and Congressional pressure on human rights and religious freedom issues. He applauded the designation of Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). He urged continued diplomatic pressure but said that he did not favor sanctions against Vietnam, as sanctions would only punish the people, and not the regime.

Thich Quang Do's travel prevented

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6. (SBU) The UBCV General Secretary told us that he would attempt to visit the ailing UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh Province the following day. He did not know if the GVN would allow him to travel as he remained under unofficial pagoda arrest. (Per ref, Thich Quang Do's was placed under pagoda arrest for

allegedly possessing state secrets after he participated in an "illegal" UBCV organizational meeting in Binh Dinh province in October 2003.)

17. (SBU) Early November 22, assistants to Thich Quang Do contacted ConGen to inform us that HCMC police were preventing the UBCV leader from leaving the city. In response, DPO contacted the Deputy Chief of the HCMC External Relations Office Le Hung Quoc to encourage the authorities to allow Thich Quang Do to proceed. Quoc did not respond. (Septel reports on Ambassador Marine's November 22 call on UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in hospital in Quy Nhon.)

18. (SBU) We were later informed that in the afternoon of November 22, Thich Quang Do was allowed to depart HCMC only to be stopped once again in neighboring Dong Nai province some 30 kilometers north of HCMC. Thich Quang Do and his accompanying monks were escorted back to HCMC under police escort, and Do was returned to his pagoda. The monk is in good condition, according to his staff. We understand that Thich Quang Do has been instructed report to the People's Committee Office as early as November 24.

Comment

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19. (SBU) Thich Quang Do made it clear that he is a political rather than a religious opponent of the Government. Strong-willed and energetic, he will not compromise with Hanoi, at least so long as the Communist Party maintains a monopoly on power. Other dissident and religious leaders described to DAS Dugan a much more nuanced view of the GVN and individual rights in Vietnam (septel).

10. (SBU) From his references to the dramatic role the UBCV played in toppling the Diem regime in 1963, the UBCV leader clearly believes that he holds latent power in Buddhist-majority Vietnam. He also made it clear that he would use that power to rally monks to oppose the Communists were he given the chance. The Communist Party, which exploited the agitation of the UBCV and other religious-groups to further its goals pre-1975, also knows its history well. In this context, its response is no surprise.

11. (SBU) We will continue to monitor closely the GVN's handling of Thich Quang Do. We also will attempt to intercede as appropriate to ensure that the UBCV leaders receive the best possible treatment from local authorities.

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